

WILD TIMES

KIDS MAGAZINE

FALL 2017

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Wildlife make use of wetlands

Have you ever heard of a wetland before? Living in Wyoming, which is the fifth driest state in the country, it may not be surprising to hear that wetlands only make up about 2% of the state's land. What might surprise you, then, is that about 90% of wildlife species in Wyoming use wetland habitats daily or seasonally throughout their lives, and about 70% of Wyoming bird species cannot survive without wetland habitat.

So we know that wetlands are important to wildlife, but what exactly is a wetland? A wetland habitat is an area where the land is sometimes or always covered by shallow water. Because of this, wetlands can support animals that live in water, those that live on land, and especially ones that like both, like frogs.

Not only do wetlands provide lots of food for animals in the form of plants, insects, fish, and smaller animals, but they also do lots of other things. These include filtering out pollution from the water and helping to keep the land stable because all the roots that wetland plants have hold soil together. Wetland areas also act like sponges to soak up water during a flood and release it slowly throughout the rest of the year. Finally, people use wetlands for outdoor activities like hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, and nature photography. Because wetlands make up such a small part of Wyoming's landscape but they do so many great things for nature and people, it is very important to be sure that our wetlands stay healthy now and in the future.



“Susan, how does Game and Fish survey trumpeter swans, and why do we count them?”

By Susan Patla
Nongame Biologist

The trumpeter swan is one of Wyoming’s most beautiful birds, but it may not be one you see very often. “Waterfowl” are what we call bird species that live in, on, and around water, including ducks, geese, and swans. The trumpeter swan is the largest waterfowl in North America with a wingspan of over 7 feet.

In the early 1900s, people thought it was almost extinct, except for a small group of birds in the Yellowstone area. If an animal species is extinct, it means that they do not exist in the wild anymore. Swans were killed by early settlers and fur trappers for their skin and meat. Thankfully, trumpeter swans did not go extinct, but they do have a small population in Wyoming that depend on shallow water wetland habitats to live. Because of this, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and our partners work hard to conserve trumpeter swans and their habitat.

To track the population of trumpeter swans that live in Wyoming, the Game and Fish wildlife managers count how many trumpeter swans they can see from a small airplane. The count happens in May, July and September in western Wyoming. These survey flights tell the biologists how many nests the trumpeter swans have made, how many baby swans have hatched, and then how many of those baby swans grow up and learn to fly. Idaho and Montana do similar surveys in the parts of their states that surround Yellowstone National Park as well. All three states work together to make



Wyoming Game and Fish Department biologist Susan Patla with a trumpeter swan.
(Photo by Mark Gocke)

sure a healthy population of trumpeter swans are living in the Yellowstone area. They also work together to make sure swans have enough wetland habitat to keep their population numbers healthy moving into the future.

Last year, in the fall of 2016, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department counted a total of 213 adults and 61 cygnets (which are what we call young swans) for a total of 274 swans in Wyoming outside of Yellowstone National Park. That is the highest number of adult trumpeter swans ever recorded in Wyoming! This is a result of years

of work to move swans and build wetland habitat in the Green River area that began in the 1990’s.

There are four to five times more swans in Wyoming in the winter compared to summer. Starting in November, trumpeter swans fly into Wyoming from Canada as they travel south on their winter migration route. Right now is an excellent time to go out and look for a trumpeter swan in the Jackson and Pinedale areas. You might see a pair with young, in fact! By early November you might be able to see swans in other areas of the state.

WILDLIFE PROFILES



Western Painted Turtle

Range: The western painted turtle can be found in North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Eastern Colorado, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Western Illinois, Montana, Washington, North of the border into Canada and low elevation parts of Wyoming.

Size: Western painted turtles can grow up to 10 inches long, and females are usually larger than males.

Habitat: The western painted turtle lives in streams and lakes as well as pasture ponds and roadside pools. It is found below 5,900 ft of elevation.

Young: Painted turtles lay an average of 5 to 15 eggs in nests dug in sandy soil near water. The eggs hatch after 72–80 days, and the young turtles grow quickly, sometimes doubling their size in the first year.

Predators: Painted turtle eggs and baby turtles are often eaten by many other animals including garter

snakes, crows, chipmunks, squirrels, skunks, snakes, weasels, muskrats, mink, raccoons, badgers and foxes. Adult turtles get eaten less often due to the safety of their shells, although sometimes they are killed by hawks, eagles, and raccoons.

Food: The western painted turtle's diet is mostly insects in the spring and early summer. Later in the summer and early fall, it eats a more balanced mix of plants and insects. They do not eat in the winter while they hibernate. While hibernating, the body temperature of the painted turtle averages 6 °C (which is 43 °F). Brr!

Did you know? A turtle's top part of its shell is called a "carapace" and the bottom part is called a "plastron." A turtle's shell is actually fused to their spine, so a turtle cannot ever leave its shell; it's an outside part of its skeleton!

WILDLIFE PROFILES



Photo by Mark Gocke

Trumpeter Swan

Range: Trumpeter swans spend their summers in northwestern and central North America, with a majority being found in Alaska. In the winter, they migrate to Southern Canada, the Eastern portion of the Northwestern in the United States, including Wyoming.

Size: Adults are usually 4 feet 6 inches–5 feet 5 inches tall, and weigh 15–30 pounds.

Habitat: Large shallow ponds, quiet lakes, wetlands, wide slow rivers, and marshes.

Young: The female lays an average of 4 to 6 eggs in a nest on a small island, beaver lodge, or muskrat lodge. Their eggs are huge, measuring an average of 3 inches wide and 4.5 inches long! Baby swans

hatch after about 35 days, and begin to swim only two days after hatching.

Predators: Adult swans are rarely killed by other animals, but their eggs and young are often eaten by raccoons, bears, coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, foxes, minks, and river otters.

Food: These birds eat mostly aquatic plants (plants that grow in the water). Swans feed while swimming. In winter, they may also eat grasses and grains in fields.

Did you know? Trumpeter swans are one of the heaviest living birds or animals capable of flight, and the largest waterfowl.

Outhouses pose danger to birds

One of the top dangers facing birds in Wyoming is accidentally getting trapped in an outhouse (also called a vault toilet) after flying down the vent pipe and being unable to fly out. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the Teton Raptor Center, with support from Wyoming Wildlife Foundation, is working to prevent birds from this fate by installing 200 “Poo-Poo screens” on vault toilet vent pipes around the state.

The open-ended vent pipes are attractive to birds that like to make their nests in small spaces called cavities. Unfortunately birds enter the vault toilet through the vent pipe and get stuck in the ‘basement’ of the vault toilet since they can’t spread their wings to fly out. The birds cannot climb up the smooth walls to escape either. The Poo Poo screen works by preventing birds from getting into the pipe in the first place. Thankfully, it still allows the outhouse to properly vent unpleasant smells. The screens are hardy and are expected to last as long as the vault toilets do.

“The project is an easy, low-cost fix to a problem that has direct benefits to wildlife in Wyoming,” said Ian Tator, Wyoming Game and Fish’s statewide terrestrial habitat manager. “Thank you to the Teton Raptor Center and the Wyoming Wildlife Foundation for their assistance in making these improvements possible.”

Wyoming has screens on 1,197 vault toilets scattered throughout the state. The screens are making a big difference for birds not only in Wyoming but also nationwide, with screens installed on outhouses in 49 states.



Above: A long-eared owl rescued from a vault toilet shows a defensive posture. The vertical open pipes on vault toilets used across the country mimic nesting areas for some species and once a bird is in a pipe, the slick sides make it impossible to get out. (Photo courtesy of the BLM)



Left: Ken Sturm with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service celebrates the installation of another screen. Screens can now be found over vault toilets in 35 states. (Photo courtesy of the USFWS)



Create a clay pot bird bath

As you have learned in this issue of Wild Times, birds and many other wildlife depend on water and wetlands to survive. You can have fun creating a place for birds to splash around and drink water by making a clay pot bird bath and putting it outside near your house.

How to make the bird bath:

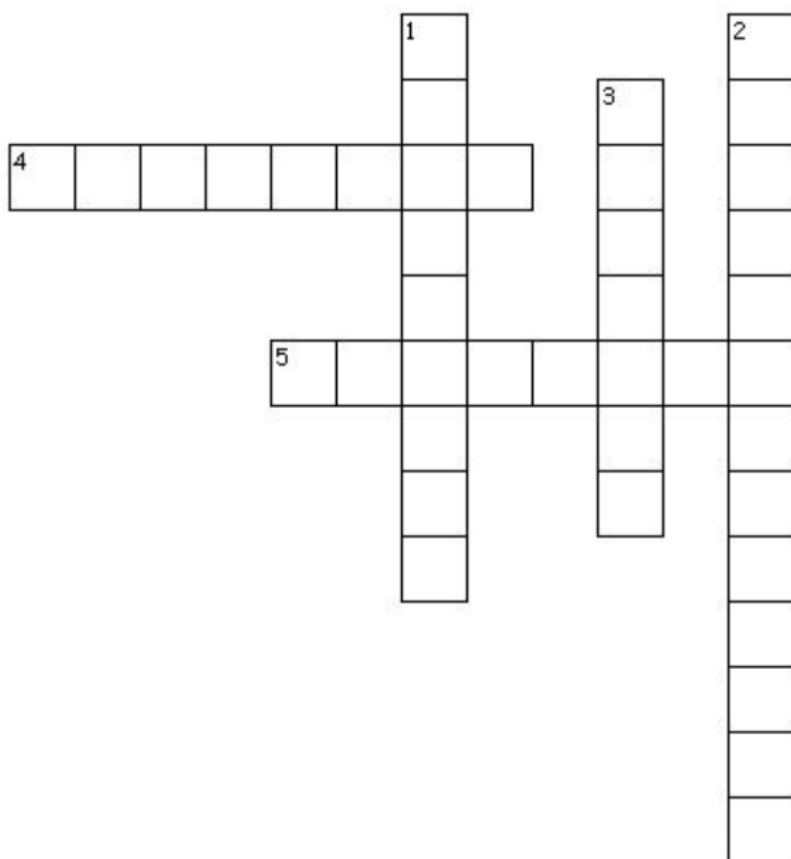
1. Turn the flower pot upside down and place the saucer right-side-up on top of it. The pictures above show a couple ways to stack pots to create your bird bath, but feel free to get creative. Glue them into place.
2. Decorate the outside of the flower pot and saucer with paint. Consider nature themed patterns!
3. Fill the saucer with clean water, and be sure to change the water every few days to prevent algae from growing. You can also place some stones in the bird bath if you have a large saucer on top to provide places for birds to perch when they are using your bath.
4. Sit back and watch birds fly in and use your bird bath! Be sure to bring the bird bath indoors during the winter to prevent it from cracking.

Materials you will need:

- A clay pot that includes a separate saucer to collect water. For a taller bird bath, you can use more than one pot.
- Acrylic paint or permanent paint markers
- Strong permanent craft glue

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Wild Times Word Search



Clues:

Down

1. You can make a bird bath out of a...
2. The largest waterfowl species
3. 90% of Wyoming wildlife use this habitat

Across

4. Bottom part of a turtle shell
5. Top part of a turtle shell

Answers:

Carapace
Plastron
Wetland
Trumpeter Swan
FlowerPot

LEARNING LINKS

Check out the Wyoming Explorers Club at www.wyqualitycounts.org/explorers-club/.

It was created to help kids develop a sense of wonder about the beautiful world they live in and to nurture a healthy, outdoor lifestyle. Guided by the Explorers Club mascots, Chuck the Beaver and Pepper the Meadowlark, you and your family will have so much fun exploring wild Wyoming together!

Books to check out

Here is the Wetland by Madeleine Dunphy

This book shows the relationships between the wetland's plants and animals, giving young readers a clear picture of how each living creature depends on the others for survival.



Take A Wetlands Walk by Jane Kirkland

Take the opportunity to explore a wetland near you, and bring this book along to help you learn as you go! Readers will learn about various types of wetlands such as marshes, bogs, floodplain forests, and swamps; how wetlands are formed; their function as a food source; and how they serve as nurseries for animals.



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